

Employer Advisory Groups
HB754 Legislative Commission
January 27, 2020

Good day to members of the HB754 Legislative Commission. My name is Tom Gallagher and I have the pleasure of serving as Dean of Missoula College. I thank all Commission members for providing an opportunity to share my perspective on the important role employer advisory committees provide two-year colleges.

The most recognized mission function of the Montana University System (MUS) comprehensive two-year college is workforce education. Connectivity between two-year college programs of study and the industries employing their graduates is essential for student success. Regular communication between employers and faculty members provides a critical feedback mechanism leading to qualitative programmatic improvement and practical relevance, while exposing students to the work-based learning experiences and permanent employment. The regularity in communication with employers results in beneficial partnerships for students and the local community. Two-year colleges need to be responsive to their local communities. These advisory groups serve a valuable role in making this connection.

This workforce education narrative from Missoula College begins with the employer advisory committee in the high-demand, high-wage career field of Information Technology (IT). The IT degree program employer advisory committee meets regularly with faculty to provide curriculum input, program oversight, and to connect students with employers. Relationships built with local employers are critical for ensuring curriculum relevance and community support. In many cases, these relationships directly benefit students as they lead to financial support in the form of scholarships and connections to a network of potential employers.

At Missoula College work-based learning is integrated in all career-technical education (CTE) programs. All IT students at Missoula College are required to complete an internship experience as graduation requirement. In working with the IT employer advisory committee and in partnership with the Department of Labor & Industry (DLI), Missoula College was able to address a workforce need by developing an apprenticeship model for IT. The model incorporates pre-apprenticeship education at Missoula College and on-the-job training with the employer. Students work part-time in their chosen career field, while attending classes. Employers win by gaining a highly-qualified, permanent employee. Students earn a salary while going to school, finish with a UM certificate or degree, and gain permanent employment.

Six IT apprenticeships were crafted in Missoula in the short timeframe of a single year. Success was attributed to strong collaborations between faculty and local employers. Key factors included a healthy employer advisory committee, a robust effort to share and in some instances modify curriculum with employers, and a well-established internship program.

Apprenticeship experiences provide students a "learn while you earn" college education, while addressing critical needs in the workforce. It is one of the great success stories that would not have happened without synergies formed through the employer advisory committee system.

Last summer, Amazon Web Services (AWS) approached the University of Montana in proposing a new workforce education partnership. The relationship with AWS was to assist in developing curriculum to prepare students for jobs using a new technology platform - cloud computing.

While a company like Amazon is not seen as a local employer, career opportunities for students with these skills are numerous in the local community. As we examine the future of work, we may see more local opportunities for remote workers as the mechanics of remote employment matures. Equally important is to recognize the benefit to local businesses. Cloud computing is a transformative technology that is changing every aspect of how IT services are delivered. Business models are evolving and adapting to leverage the benefits of this next evolution in the technology solutions industry.

The cloud computing education program concept and curriculum was shared with local employer advisory committee members. The feedback from local employers was supportive and enthusiastic, as they foresee the upcoming changes in their collective business model(s). Developing a workforce of individuals educated in new technology such as cloud computing creates a ripple benefit for all businesses in the technology sector. Based upon the support of AWS and local employers, Missoula College “cloudified” its IT education program and began delivery of a Cloud Computing Certificate in January 2020.

One result of this newfound partnership with AWS was a three-day, not-for-credit workforce education program delivered last Autumn at both Missoula College and Gallatin College. The training focused on the backbone of cloud computing, fiber optics cabling. The content consisted of the technical aspects for assembling and splicing fiber optic media. The training was delivered by fiber optic experts from Sumitomo Electric Lightwave. Local employers were encouraged to send their employees to update skills. Two-year college degree seeking students were invited to attend.

A mixed cohort of 30 incumbent workers and two-year college IT degree students completed the training at Missoula College and earned an industry certificate from Amazon. Local employers reaped the immediate benefit as professionals on their team developed skills in new technologies. Students from Missoula College and Gallatin College added to the toolbox of skills as they continue on the pathway in completing the associate degree. The training took place at no cost to participants, local employers, or the college(s) through the generosity of AWS. The training would not have been successful without the support of local employers, technology giant AWS, and local two-year colleges.

Delivery of the work-based learning activities of internships and apprenticeships, and partnerships for industry-based education programs provide two concrete examples of the important role employer advisory committees contribute for two-year college workforce education.